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Spectres, Politics and Poetics: *Hamlet* in the Poetry of Eugenio Montejo

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Los poetas no convencen.
Tampoco vencen.
Su papel es otro, ajeno al poder: ser contraste.

RAFAEL CADENAS¹

Ghosts are never far from the surface in the poetry of Venezuelan Eugenio Montejo (1938–2008). His verse, in particular the early collections *Élegos* [*Elegies*] (1967) and *Muerte y memoria* [*Death and Memory*] (1972), is haunted, for example, by the presence of the now-dead family and community members from the poet's semi-rural childhood, and on repeated occasions both throughout his poetic and essayistic output and in interviews he refers to language as being inhabited by the voices, inflections, and meanings of those who once spoke those words but who are now long gone. And, amongst the hundreds of poems he wrote in his lifetime, two are based around *Hamlet* and its spectral figure: "Hamlet Acto Primero" ["Hamlet Act One"], from *Muerte y memoria* and "La hora de Hamlet" ["Hamlet's hour"] from *Adiós al siglo XX* [*Goodbye to the 20th century*] (1997). The figure of Hamlet is, to be sure, also mentioned in the poems "El duende" ["The imp"] and "Lejos, allá en el siglo XX" ["Far away, there in the 20th century"], both from *Fabúla del escriba* [*The Scribe's Fable*] (2006). But it does not constitute the central subject matter of these poems, as it does in "Hamlet Acto Primero" and "La hora de Hamlet", two poems which might be said to haunt Montejian scholarship, in that they are left almost entirely unstudied: Juan Medina Figueredo makes brief mention of "Hamlet Acto Primero" in his book *La terredad de Orfeo* [*The Earth-doom of Orpheus*] (115–16), but does little more than describe some of the basic events depicted in the poem, and, to my knowledge, the later poem is absent from any published scholarship on Montejo. Yet, I will argue, these two poems, deriving from a play whose political elements are evident, serve to draw attention to a fundamental haunting in Montejo's own writing and being, as they bring together, on the one hand, the theme of the ghostly presence of a past whose loss in

¹(Cadenas 537) ["Poets do not convince. / Neither do they conquer. / Their role is other, foreign to power: to be a contrast."]

the modern era Montejo laments, and, on the other, the author's often latent, yet strongly held, political concerns. In so doing, they offer us a way of understanding not just Montejo's relationship to his country and politics in the twentieth century, but, more particularly, his relationship to and stance *vis-à-vis* the regime of Hugo Chávez under which he spent the last decade of his life, revealing in the process the possibilities for seeing poetry as an oppositional space to political and historical realities.

The first of the two poems centred around the Shakespearean figure, "Hamlet Acto Primero", was published in 1972 and reads as follows:

Mira la sala: no es el cortinado
lo que tiembla. Ni la sombra de Hamlet.
Tal vez, tal vez la capa de su padre,
todas las noches son de Dinamarca.

Los soldados se turnan la ronda
y lían sus cigarros.
Tan crudo sopla allí el erebo
que no se aclara en la pantalla
ninguna imagen del televisor.
Pero la noche tiembla
y las tómidas narices del caballo
nos olfatean bajo la nieve . . .
¿Qué país no arrastra su Rey muerto?
Pasan los comerciales
y regresa la voz fría del espectro.

Es él, es él, es su fantasma
y la venganza de esa capa sola
estremece los clavos del perchero.
El locutor anuncia otra nevada
para mañana, pero roja, siniestra.
Todas las noches son de Dinamarca.
(37)

[Look at the room: it is not the curtains
that tremble. Nor Hamlet's shadow.
Maybe, maybe his father's cloak,
every night is that of Denmark.

The soldiers take turns on patrol
and roll their cigarettes.
Erebus blows so raw there
that not a single image is clear
on the television screen.
But the night trembles
and the swollen nostrils of the horse
sniff at us under the snow . . .
What country does not bear the burden of a dead King?

The adverts finish
and back again comes the cold voice of the spectre.
It is him, it is him, it is his ghost
and the vengeance of that lonely cloak
shakes the hooks on the coat rack.
The announcer forecasts another snowfall
for tomorrow, but red, fateful.
Every night is that of Denmark.]²

An initial reading highlights several key elements of the poetic scene laid before us that immediately call attention to themselves. Firstly, the poem is evidently set in the twentieth century, the reference to the television, the programme, the adverts placing us, more specifically, within the technologised, virtual reality that would in many ways end up defining the last three decades of the century, both in homes and beyond. Secondly, the viewers, the ostensible speaking subject of the poem, remain undefined, limited to the depersonalised third person plural pronoun; and, thirdly and relatedly, line 13 suggests that this scene can be applied to any country in the world. It appears, in short, to be a poem concerned with being in the twentieth century. As such, “Hamlet Acto Primero” fits in with much of Montejo’s poetics of this period and beyond, where there is an insistent and wistful focus on the move from life in contact with nature towards one governed by the artificial and technological. Thus, we find Montejo making allusion to the replacement of horses by bicycles (“A una bicicleta” [“To a bicycle”], 1972: 16), or to the reducing of a living tree to a new existence as a man-made chair (“Regreso” [“Return”], 13). This transformation reaches its apogee in the large-scale and general move from the rural to the urban: the rapid and ever-increasing urbanisation witnessed within the Venezuelan reality of the period covered by these poems (1950s to 1980s), due in no small measure to the country’s booming oil industry. Such realities are brought out in some of Montejo’s most iconic poems, such as “Caracas”, which portrays the conversion of the Venezuelan capital into a dizzying paen to urban modernity:

Rectos andamios, torre sobre torre,
nos ocultan ahora la montaña.
El ruido crece a mil motores por oído,
a mil autos por pie, todos mortales.
(1982: 55)

[Straight scaffolding, tower upon tower,
hides the mountain from us.
The noise grows at a thousand engines per ear,
at a thousand cars per foot, every one mortal.]³

²All translations are either completely my own or are amended versions of translations found in Montejo (2004). In most cases I err on the side of the literal.

³The mountain alluded to here is the Ávila mountain that forms the monumental backdrop to Caracas, to the north.

At the same time, however, there is also an awareness of the global nature of these changes: the fact that the contemporary urban present depicted in his poetry, where “el contacto con lo natural nos llega tamizado, cubierto, trastornado” [contact with the natural reaches us sieved, covered, disrupted] (1974: 62), is not limited to Venezuela is made evident by the way in which the lament for the transformation of Caracas is re-poeticised as concerning the cityspace in general:⁴

Una ciudad no es fiel a un río ni a un árbol,
mucho menos a un hombre.

(1982: 16)

[A city is not faithful to a river nor to a tree,
much less to a man.]

Equally as important, both in terms of an understanding of Montejó's work and for the purposes of this study, is the implicit rejection of capitalism found in this poetics. This is not just a lament centred around urbanisation, but a lament that has as its target the capitalist project that underlies it. Miguel Gomes (2002) has shown the extent to which the Venezuela of the 1960s and 1970s represented a capitalist space *par excellence*, and has, usefully, invoked Raymond Williams's depiction of the role of the rural as a way of understanding how Montejó's poetry reflects an oppositional stance to contemporary capitalist progressionism: “The idea of rural community is predominantly residual, but is in some limited respects alternative or oppositional to urban industrial capitalism” (Williams 122).⁵ More directly, from as early as the 1980s up until shortly before his death, Montejó was fond of repeating in interviews his view of poetry as being the last alternative religion left to humankind in the face of the religion of money:

Estamos ante la religión del dinero, por una parte, con un gran fundamentalismo, pues aunque siempre ha estado presente lo crematístico, últimamente, a raíz de todo el materialismo moderno se ha acentuado y se ha convertido prácticamente en la única religión que el hombre moderno acata.

(Gutiérrez Plaza)

[We are faced with the religion of money, on the one hand, with a great fundamentalism, since, although the chrematistic has always been present,

⁴See Roberts 2009 (20–21 and 121–59) for a detailed analysis of how Montejó elucidates the shift from agrarian to urban lifestyle and environment both in Venezuela and more generally. Gomes 2002 (1009–115) also deals with the way in which Montejó's response to the urban and technological expansion of the 1950s to 1980s stands in contrast to that of plastic artists of the likes of Jesús Soto.

⁵As this quotation suggests, the appeal to the rural can be—and, of course, often is—seen as a reactionary and essentially conservative move. What is important in Williams's statement, and in particular for the case of Montejó's poetics, is that the possibility of wider, even conflicting, political interpretations of such (poetic) stances and postures is left open. It is a warning, then, against the sort of political reductionism that, as this article will go on to show, is challenged by both Montejó's poetics and (the way it presents) Venezuelan contemporary politics.

recently, as a result of the extent of modern materialism, it has been accentuated and has become practically the only religion that modern man observes.]

The question remains, then, as to how the poem “Hamlet Acto Primero” and, more generally, *Hamlet* itself can be understood as contributing to this overarching Montejian topos, not least because Montejo’s poetry in general engages more with local (Venezuelan, tropical) colour and being and personal experiences than with any direct, named involvement of European arts. And where it does bring in such elements, such as in the poem “Madona en el metro” [“Madonna on the metro”] (1972: 31), centred around a painting by Titian, most probably *Pesaro Madonna*, or “Uccello, Hoy 6 de agosto” [“Uccello, today August 6”] (about the Italian painter’s *Battle of San Morano*), “Mares de Turner” [“Turner’s seas”], and “Dos Rembrandt” [“Two Rembrandts”] from *Algunas palabras* [*A Few Words*] (21, 45, 47), the poems in question do not record the same intricately entwined relationship between the work of art referred to and the first person collective of the poet and, one infers, his countrymen, as found in “Hamlet Acto Primero”.⁶ Firstly, it is notable that the poem modifies both the perspective and focus of the first act of the play that it putatively re-enacts. Rather than assuming the point of view of the Prince, Montejo positions himself and the broader collective of which the poetic I is a part, in a way more aligned with the figure of Claudius. Bearing in mind the symbolism inherent in the role and character of the King, we thus see how Montejo’s rewriting of the first act of Shakespeare’s play serves to shift attention away from the figure of Hamlet, called to take vengeance on the current monarch, and onto that regal figure himself, a figure who is the (causal) corporealisation and personification of a rotten nation. The focus, that is, is placed firmly on the representative of a nation whose nature and being needs to be “set [...] right” (Shakespeare 2006: 227), in contrast to the previous regal representative of that same nation. The indeterminacy of the “nosotros” [we] in the poem is also pivotal here in that it helps enhance more pointedly the symbolic value of the poem’s subject as the twentieth-century nation (both Venezuela and more generally, see line 13) brought face to face with the ghost of its past, of the nation of old from which it has fallen, and for whose end it is responsible. This suggests, then, that the King, whose ghost haunts the poem, the “nosotros”, and the television screen they are watching, is the cipher of a prior age—a Golden Age—now lost.

Such a reading is supported by the possible identifications of the dead King that are found in Montejo’s poetry of the period, all of which, in addition, suggest a reading of this poem which focuses more particularly on Venezuela as being

⁶In the poem “Ulises” [“Ulysses”] from *Alfabeto del mundo* [*Alphabet of the World*] (215), the poet and the protagonist of the Homeric epic are brought together in a more concerted way and, likewise, the alignment of the poet, both Montejo himself and as a generic figure, with Orpheus has been well documented in relation to Montejo’s work (see Balza, Rivera, and Roberts 2009 (12–22), for example). But the collective and total absorption into an extraneous work of art in “Hamlet Acto Primero” is not found anywhere else in Montejo’s poetic output.

the nation at stake. For example, as I alluded to earlier, Montejo's early collections in particular are populated by the dead from the poet's childhood past, a past portrayed in terms which identify it as a quasi-pastoral Golden Age (see Roberts 2009: 39–61). These now-dead family and community members are frequently depicted as riding upon horses, thus resonating with lines 11–12 of "Hamlet Acto Primero": "los muertos andan bajo tierra a caballo" [the dead move underground on horseback] (1967: 5) and "los muertos bajo tierra a caballo" [the dead underground on horseback] (1972: 7). In addition, and particularly significant for our current purposes, Montejo refers to his brother, who died while still young, as "el Rey Ricardo" [King Richard]:

Mi hermano el Rey Ricardo murió una mañana
en un hospital de ciudad.

(1967: 23)

[My brother, King Richard, died one morning
in a city hospital.]

The King who has been killed, then, is identifiable with characters from a past associated with the innocence and the atemporality both of childhood and of a semi-rural, communitarian idyll. "Hamlet Acto Primero", that is, can be seen as an example of Montejo's concern for dealing poetically with the loss of a symbiotic contact with nature and of the unifying rites and customs of a more agrarian familial and communitarian life.

But beyond this personal and mid to late twentieth-century reading, there is a further possible identification for the dead King, and one which, whilst playing into the general topos of a lost Golden Age, also ties "Hamlet Acto Primero" in with a much broader national and, to an extent, more political discourse. Written in 1976, some four years after *Muerte y memoria*, though not published in Montejo's own œuvre until 1988, the poem "Nostalgia de Bolívar" ["Nostalgia of/for Bolívar"] concerns the figure of Simón Bolívar, and portrays The Liberator as the lifeblood of the Venezuelan people and land, coursing through them as a metaphorical river nourishing the nature, physicality and being of both:

En el mapa natal que tatuamos en sueño
sobre la piel, las manos, las voces de esta tierra,
Bolívar es el primero de los ríos
que cruzan nuestros campos.

(2005: 107)

[On the native map that in our dreams we tattoo
on our skin, our hands, the voices of this land,
Bolívar is the first of the rivers
that cross our fields.]

The poem depicts Bolívar in Christ-like terms, not least in the description of how “en cada mesa se parte el pan en nombre suyo, | en cada voz resuena su palabra” [at every table the bread is broken in his name, | in every voice echoes his word] (109), contributing to an overall presentation of a mythified and beatified persona. But it also contains two references which resonate with and, I would argue, appeal to verses found in “Hamlet Acto Primero”. First, there is mention of how (the “river”) Bolívar “pasa silencioso | cubierto con su capa” [passes silently by | covered in his cloak] (107), echoing the “venganza de esa capa sola | [que] estremece los clavos del perchero” [vengeance of that lonely cloak | [that] shakes the hooks on the coat rack] (1972: 37). Second, we have a double, but more oblique, reference in the lines “hay una gota roja que cae desde la orilla | y otra gota que tiembla” [there is a red drop which falls from the shore | and another drop which trembles] (2005: 108), which recall, on the one hand, the allusions to “lo que tiembla” [that tremble[s]] and “la noche tiembla” [the night trembles] (1972: 37) in the earlier poem, and, on the other, its final image of the forecast snowfall as “roja, siniestra” [red, sinister] (37). Notably, both of these epithets convey threat and danger, matching the tone found in these two lines from “Nostalgia de Bolívar”, in contrast, it is worth noting, to the rest of that poem.

These tonal and lexical links between the two poems suggest that Bolívar himself, as the ultimate symbol of the Venezuelan nation, could be the King of “Hamlet Acto Primero”, an especially appropriate identification given the role played by the Venezuelan nation, personified by the then President José Antonio Páez, in rejecting and obliging Bolívar to go into exile in 1830, a symbolic killing made literal in that Bolívar died in Santa Marta, Colombia, before definitively setting sail. It is, then, an identification that emphasises the nature of the loss as being that of a mythic and mythified national being, and one which comes with a certain political charge. Indeed, in this respect “Nostalgia de Bolívar” also plays an important role in hinting at the usefulness for our examination of Montejó’s *Hamlet* poems of Jacques Derrida’s engagement with the play in his seminal *Specters of Marx*, at least, at this stage of Montejó’s work and my study of it, in the sense that the spectre can be understood as a past system and, in the case of Bolívar, figure of governance whose ghostly presence and potentialities still make themselves felt in an essentially capitalist society. I will explore some of the ramifications of this invocation of Derrida in due course.

A quarter of a century after the publication of “Hamlet Acto Primero” in *Muerte y memoria*, the poem “La hora de Hamlet” [“Hamlet’s hour”] appears in the expanded 1997 edition of the collection *Adiós al siglo XX*. It is a very different poem, in mood, feel, and focus, and in the elements of *Hamlet* to which it appeals. The poem in its entirety reads as follows:

Esta mañana me sorprende
con mi olvidada calavera entre las manos.
Hago de Hamlet.

Es la hora reductiva del monólogo
en que interrogo a mi Hacedor
sobre esta máscara que ha de volverse polvo,
sobre este polvo que sigue hablando todavía
aquí y acaso en otra parte.

A la distancia que me encuentre de la muerte,
hago de Hamlet.

Hamlet y pájaro con vértigo de alturas,
tras las almenas del íngrimo castillo
que cada quien erige piedra a piedra
para ser o no ser según la suerte,
el destino, la sombra, los pasos del fantasma.

(31)

[This morning surprises me
with my forgotten skull in my hands.
I am playing Hamlet.

It is the reductive hour of the monologue
where I question my Maker
about this mask that is to turn to dust,
about this dust that still keeps talking
here and maybe in some other place.

At whatever distance I find myself from death,
I am playing Hamlet.

Hamlet and a bird afraid of heights,
behind the battlements of that lonely castle
that each of us builds, stone by stone,
in order to be or not to be, according to chance,
fate, shadows, the footsteps of the ghost.]

There are two particularly notable shifts here: firstly, we have moved to the fifth act of the play, to the musings on the deathly fate that awaits us all and to the time—the hour—for Hamlet both to act and to die. In this way, this later poem adds to the ontological elements and concerns of the earlier poem and Montejó's early poetry in general. In particular, it alludes to the figure of the ghost not just as a remnant of the past, but also as a marker of the spectrality of being. The allusion to Act 5 Scene 1, where Hamlet muses on the ineluctable turning to dust of human life, underscores the sense that life is forever shot through by death, that its meaning, our sense of being, is bound up with its concomitant absence. This, of course, refers not just to our own life and our awareness of the future within which it is inscribed but, as line 8 of Montejó's poem implies, to the continuing presence of death and the dead in the presence of life *per se*. This chimes with a distinctly Derridean strand of *Hamlet*-inspired thought: the idea that being must be understood as, and as only made possible by, a play of absence and presence, shot

through by that which escapes it. Hence the fact that, despite putatively leaving the play's first act behind, the poem ends by returning to the figure of the ghost from Act 1, in lines that are deliberately oblique, multivalent, resisting a fixity of meaning and understanding, yet positing the central questions of being and action as determined precisely by such an entity.

The second change from "Hamlet Acto Primero" lies in the fact that the attention has shifted from the amorphous collective of the earlier poem, placed in the position of Claudius, to the individual poet, identified with and as Hamlet. That is to say, bringing the two poems together, if the nation—both generally and specifically that of Venezuela—is rotten, living in and as a result of the murder or destruction of a previous ideal being, then it is the Hamletian poet, now differentiated from that collective, who is to act, who is "born to set it right" (Shakespeare 2006: 227), to put to death the current, inauthentic, technologised, capitalist world devoid of natural and communitarian contact, as the Heideggerean resonances of Montejo's work are made apparent (see, for example, Heidegger 1977 and 1994). What is more, whilst "La hora de Hamlet" may most obviously and immediately be concerned with the idea of the individual speaker as a being-unto-death, there is a further, if coincidental, connection between these two poems which helps underscore the importance of the political here, enabling us to read "La hora de Hamlet" as, on the one hand, indicating that it is in the national political discourse of Venezuela that the spectral heart of both of these Hamletian poems lies, whilst, on the other, bringing about a radical reappraisal of the nature of that discourse within Montejo's verse. In Montejo's poetic work there are almost no references to figures from Venezuela's political history. In fact, there are only two. One of these, the reference to Simón Bolívar, is found in the poem "Nostalgia de Bolívar", written just a few years after "Hamlet Acto Primero", as we have seen, and with several lexical links to that poem. The other is to Juan Vicente Gómez, the dictator who ruled Venezuela in a brutal regime from 1908 to 1935. It appears in the poem "Una fotografía de 1948" ["A Photograph from 1948"], which, in a ghostly echoing of the earlier poems' chronology, was published in the collection *Partitura de la cigarra* [*The Cicada's Score*] in 1999, just two years after "La hora de Hamlet". It contains, I would contend, a highly revealing line for our understanding of Montejo's *Hamlet* poems and the identity of the ghost found in them. Its second appearance in the poem is the poem's final line, cited here in context:

Queda el mismo país siempre soleado,
de feraces paisajes, veloz música,
minas, planicies y petróleo,
país de amada sangre en nuestras venas,
que no termina de enterrar a Gómez.

(20)

[The same forever sun-washed country remains,
untamed landscapes, fast music,
mines, plains, and oil,

a country that is the beloved blood in our veins,
and that cannot finish burying Gómez.]

Here, then, is the ghost that haunts Venezuela, and, I would suggest, the most significant identification of the ghost not just in “La hora de Hamlet”, but “Hamlet Acto Primero” as well: Gómez, the dictator. In positing the ghost as the relatives and friends of the lost age of childhood, in the general avoidance of an overtly, specifically Venezuelan political engagement, even to the extent that the reference to Bolívar is couched in decidedly mythic terms, Montejo’s work has sought on some level to refuse to recognise, let alone to give voice to, the spectral presence of this political ghost, to bury it beneath a series of more ontological concerns. But this poem finally discloses the identity of this spectre, granting it a name. Read back into both poems, then, our interpretation of them changes significantly, as they come to constitute a significant modification of *Hamlet*. The ghost is not a benevolent and revered father figure murdered as the country is sent down a tyrannous path (and neither is it a leader from a past Golden Age in the mould of Bolívar). Rather, it is a tyrannical father figure, whose presence looms large, the spectral presence of a political legacy of fear and dictatorship, of *caudillismo*. This is not a ghost who is asking for action to be taken in his name, as in *Hamlet*, but one who is himself a haunting threat to what had, at the time of the writing of the *Hamlet* poems, become a functioning democracy in Venezuela. The task facing the Hamletian poet, then, is not just to kill the country as it is, to put to death the capitalist ideology that has brought the country to poetic and ontological ruin, although this element is still present, but also finally to kill off—to finish burying—Gómez.

In the process, this reading also shows that *Hamlet* is not the only European text, or discourse, that is modified by Montejo in these poems. As I have argued elsewhere, Montejo’s work can often be read as offering Latin American retellings and recastings of European narratives, poetics, and symbology (Roberts 2009: 32–35, 102–09, 179–82). And, in this case, his poetics of spectres, *Hamlet* and politics, whilst, as we have seen, resonating with, or foretelling, Derrida’s engagement with these elements, also serves as a reminder of an essential difference between Europe and Latin America, and, attendantly, of the dangers of simplistically applying historical, philosophical, and political discourses from and about the Old Continent to Latin American realities. The French thinker’s place of reflection and concern in *Specters of Marx* was explicitly and overtly that of Europe (Derrida 3–5). Montejo’s ambit was other, with a different historical and political trajectory. Thus, although Montejo was concerned about and stood in opposition to the chrematistic world of capitalism, in being capitalism as experienced in Venezuela, it is not the ghost of Marx that haunts it and demands to be revisited; the political ghost that haunts contemporary Venezuela is not so much a riposte to and demand for a radical critique of its guiding principles of profit and private ownership (although Montejo is, independently, engaged in such a critique, as we have seen), as a retro-

grade system that threatens the advances in democracy, freedom and safety (from the state) that were a part of the capitalist system in place, if not necessarily a direct effect of that system. The ghost, then, is not the possibility of a solution to contemporary problems or a horizon of hope, but an alternative that offers simply a different set of political and ontological shackles.

Thus it is that Montejó, in contrast to Derrida, seeks not to welcome the ghost, but to exorcise it. Of course, one is bound to ask, leaving aside the question of the ethics of such a move, whether such exorcism is even possible: how does one act upon a ghost, a figure who is precisely outside the bounds of being, which troubles and disrupts any sense of a full and solid present/presence? It is, in many ways, a question that Venezuelan political history should have helped sidestep, as is signalled by the poem “Una fotografía de 1948”, which is doubly significant in terms of dates. Firstly, 1948 is both the year when Rómulo Gallegos assumed the presidency of Venezuela as the country’s first ever democratically elected president, and yet also the year when he was toppled by a coup d’état which led to the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. But equally as significant is the year of publication of this poem: 1999, the year when Hugo Chávez became president of the country, a man who, in Montejó’s (and others’) eyes, came to be an example not of a realisation of Marxist thought, ideas and radical critique, as he is wont to be seen by many (I shall say more about this perception of Chávez shortly), but of the return of the authoritarian *caudillo* to the position of Head of State.⁷ In short, in its content and, as emerges with hindsight, its historical contextualisations, the poem tells of the repeated corporealisation of the ghost of Gómez, and with it, then, the chance to act, in—possibly not literally!—murderous form.⁸

And yet, despite speaking out against the Chávez regime, concerning cultural policy in particular, both in public and far more broadly and openly in private, Montejó’s poetry from that point on until his death in 2008 remained politically silent.⁹ But why? It could be seen as a rejection of the possibility of poetry as being able adequately to speak of or address embodied or actualised ideology. But the answer could also be found by turning once more to the *Hamlet* poems themselves. What we see is that they are shot through not with action, but with words and performance. “Hamlet Acto Primero” begins with “Mira la sala”, a phrase whose ambiguity cannot be rendered in translation, since “sala” means both lounge—

⁷See, for example, Arenas. Corrales presents a good overview of the authoritarian tendencies and practices of Chávez, including a sense of where different scholars are positioned in this debate. Montejó made clear his view of Chávez as an authoritarian *caudillo* figure on several occasions. See, for example, Valero and Campo. It is notable that, as the sources mentioned here make clear, such a view of Chávez is held to a lesser or greater degree amongst scholars—and, we might add, writers and artists—of the left as well as the right.

⁸Gomes 2004 (xxiii–xxiv) also draws attention to Chávez as the revival of the ghost in this poem.

⁹Montejó criticised the Chávez government in several interviews (see, for example, “Eugenio Montejó: ‘En Venezuela hay una censura velada’” and Campo), and implicitly in essays such as “La balada del insomnio venezolano” (Montejó 2007). He was also one of the signatories of a highly critical open letter released in 2004 and signed by some 220 academics, intellectuals and cultural figures from Venezuela.

the setting for the watching of television portrayed in the poem—and theatre hall, with the reference to the curtains then also being ambiguous. We could well offer a reading that echoes famous lines from *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* here, of course, in seeing the poem as depicting the world as a stage, but for our present purposes what is notable is that this sense of theatrical performance is followed up by a repeated emphasis on language and the voice: the images on the television screen are unclear, suggestive of the ghost, of course, but also causing us—and the poem—to home in on speech: “la voz fría del espectro” [the cold voice of the spectre] (Montejo 1972: 37), the announcer who speaks of snow. Turning to “La hora de Hamlet”, there is a similar setting up of the notion of performance: “Hago de Hamlet” [I am playing Hamlet] (Montejo 1997: 31), followed, once more, by a foregrounding of language and speech: the monologue; the dead whose speech lingers on; the bird as the general and particularly Montejian symbol of the poet and his song (see Roberts 2009: 139–49); the castle made of stones, which, in the context of Montejo’s poetry, where stones are frequently metaphors for words (see Roberts 2009: 184–203 and Roberts 2004), stands as a declaration that one’s life, the base from which one undertakes being and action, is to be understood primarily as linguistic. These poems focus, then, not on Hamlet’s act of revenge, but on (his/the poet’s) verbal performance, with the two poems reflecting the Shakespearean play’s dual presentation of the Prince: in “Hamlet Acto Primero” the poet (Hamlet) is the writer of a “play” (the poem) and in “La hora de Hamlet” he is the performer of and in a play. In other words, the poems speak of the poet as constrained within what he is: a performer, a writer, bound within language and its performance (a “prison-house” (Shakespeare 2006: 212) indeed). The implications of this are apparent when we consider the Derridean overtones to these poems’ depiction of language, in that the effect of language is precisely to spectralise, to render ghostly as it pulls everything it touches into its haunting and haunted web of absence and presence. And so, Montejo, faced with the embodied spectre, could be seen to say nothing in his poetry because to poeticise, to take poetic action would be merely to re-spectralise Chávez as the ghost that has haunted Venezuela and his poetry since Gómez.

Nevertheless, there is also a more affirmative way of understanding this apparent poetic silence, and a way of understanding why Montejo felt Chávez and the contemporary political situation could be tackled in explicit terms in interviews and speeches, but not in poetry. One of the most repeated comments that Montejo made about Chávez regarded his use of language: the sense that he abused language, misused words, twisted meanings, employed terms to divide and condemn rather than unite.¹⁰ In 2004, for example, he declared in interview with Ernesto Campo:

El intencionado mal uso del idioma, el empleo deliberado de expresiones chabacanas dichas desde los medios de mayor difusión, supone un menosprecio de la lengua, así como de la memoria de quienes han hablado esta

¹⁰The Venezuelan poets Yolanda Pantin and Verónica Jaffé have made similar comments on Chávez’s use of both the Spanish language and poetry (see Gackstetter Nichols 307–08).

lengua entre nosotros a lo largo de cinco siglos. Tal vez en el empleo del léxico y la entonación se concreta uno de los rasgos más sensibles de la identidad de un pueblo, de allí la necesidad de prestar mayor atención al lenguaje. Me pregunto sin ironía si en el lenguaje de nuestros actuales gobernantes la gente se reconoce.

[The purposeful misuse of language, the deliberate use of vulgar expressions spoken in the most widely disseminated media, reveals a scorn for our language, as well as for the memory of those who have spoken this language amongst us over the last five centuries. Perhaps in the use of the lexicon and intonation one finds one of the most sensitive characteristics of a people's identity, and because of that there is the need to pay greater attention to language. I wonder, without irony, whether the people recognise themselves in the language of our current leaders.]

Faced with this, poetry becomes, in the hands of the critical poet, a space apart, an uncontaminated locus where language itself is what is "set [...] right" (Shakespeare 2006: 227). Opposition, then, is not about expressing criticism or dissent, but about creating an alternative linguistic space, a poetic space, an intangible, sacred space, to be sure, as Montejo's earlier poetic concerns and goals come to be recast in an implicitly political way. Indeed, Montejo frequently appealed to the idea of the poet working away at night by lamplight as an image of the saving presence of the poet, the light in the darkness, not least in poems such as "Dormir" ["To sleep"] (1976: 69), "Réplica nocturna" ["Night-time response"] (1982: 44), "Mi lámpara" ["My lamp"] (2005: 161), and "Noche en la noche" ["Night at night"] (1999: 11). And it is thus perhaps fitting that in the final poem in which Montejo mentions the Danish Prince, "Lejos, allá en el siglo XX", he should do so in reference to the Czech poet Vladimír Holan, who wrote a long poem called "A night with Hamlet". Montejo writes: "Holan, insomne, al lado de su lámpara | se encomendaba a Hamlet" [Holan, sleepless, beside his lamp | would commend himself to Hamlet] (2006: 19). Holan spent his final years in the 1970s, one of the most oppressive decades of communist Czechoslovakia, as a recluse, on the island of Kampa in the centre of Prague: politically, poetically silent in the heart of the communist capital, and yet where the presence, the knowledge of Holan's lamp shining away was enough to know that the poetic space, the space of resistance, of an alternative discourse, was alive. As Montejo stated in interview two years before the publication of "Lejos, allá en el siglo XX":

El poeta checo Vladimir Holan [...] se encerró en su casa, en un islote frente a Praga, donde no recibía a casi nadie y trabajaba sólo de noche. Pero de algún modo, cuando la lámpara de la casa de Holan estaba encendida, muchos sentían que el alma checa también estaba encendida.

(Campo 2004)

[The Czech poet Vladimír Holan [...] shut himself away in his house, on an island opposite Prague, where he received no one and worked alone at night. But in some way, when the lamp in Holan's house was alight, many would feel that the Czech soul was also alight.]

As is ever the case in Montejo's poetry, however, this allusion to a European figure at once both offers a model for understanding how Montejo is trying to cast (his) poetry and also alerts us to the specificity of the Venezuelan ambit in which he was writing and to which he was responding. The communist reality surrounding Holan should not be taken as a direct or exact analogy with the Chávez regime which surrounded Montejo in his homeland when writing this poem, but rather as offering a useful parallel. Thus, for example, whilst the concentration of power in the hands of the executive under Chávez, together with government policies that led to both the silencing and self-censorship of critical voices in the media and arts, underscores the elements of democratic repression that link the two cases,¹¹ Chávez's Venezuela remained committed to popular and democratic elections, in stark contrast to 1970s' Czechoslovakia. Similarly, whereas many leftist groups both within and outside of Venezuela consider Chávez to have been very much a socialist, if not communist, leader,¹² it is worth noting that this is by no means a stance held by all parties on the left: all of the Venezuelan parties linked to Socialist International were, by the end of his life, in opposition to Chávez,¹³ and some of his most strident critics outside of the country came from the far left, seeing his twenty-first-century socialism to have been more capitalist than genuinely communist, with The Internationalist Bolshevik Tendency describing Chávez's socialism, for example, as "simply capitalism under a different name" ("Marxism and the Bolivarian Revolution: Venezuela and the Left").¹⁴ Once more, then, we are reminded of the insufficiency in modern Venezuela both of a simplistic *caudillo*/democracy and right/left differentiation and of the capitalist/Marxist dichotomy that serves as Derrida's starting point in *Specters of Marx*. Indeed, we might say that Chávez, rather, serves as an amalgam of what could be termed a capitalist socialism and

¹¹For a recent study of the anti-democratic tendencies in Chávez's final period of government see Human Rights Watch. Montejo addresses the specific question of cultural censorship in "Eugenio Montejo: 'En Venezuela hay una censura velada'". For more scholarly, though less recent, accounts of both the democratic and anti-democratic aspects of Chávez's governments, see, for example, Coppedge, and Ellner and Hellinger.

¹²Within Venezuela, Chávez enjoyed the support of left-wing parties such as the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (communist), *Movimiento por la Democracia Directa* (leftist) and *Patria Para Todos* (centre-left), as well as that of other such parties (for example, the *Liga Socialista* (Marxist/Leninist/Maoist) and the *Corriente Marxista Revolucionaria* (Marxist)) which amalgamated into Chávez's *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* [*United Socialist Party of Venezuela*]. Outside Venezuela, moderate leftist groups such as the *New Left Review*, the *Venezuela Solidarity Campaign*, and the *Labour Friends of Venezuela Group* were supportive of Chávez.

¹³The two full member parties of Socialist International in Venezuela, *Acción Democrática* (centre-left) and *Movimiento al Socialismo* (socialist/social-democratic), both formed (and continue to form at the time of writing) part of the opposition collective *Mesa de la Unidad*. There is a third Venezuelan political party linked to Socialist International as a consultative party, *PODEMOS* (centre-left). This party was similarly in opposition to the Chávez government, until 7 June 2012, when the Venezuelan Supreme Court ordered the leadership of the party to pass from Ismael García to Didalco Bolívar, who supported Chávez. The reaction of Socialist International was to declare support for the former leadership (and its continued support of the opposition grouping) and concern at the damaging effects of the ruling for Venezuelan democracy (Socialist International).

¹⁴See also Antunes and "Venezuela: new phases, new dangers".

caudillismo, a composite figure, that is, who brought together, amongst other elements, the main historical and political discourses against which we have seen Montejo to have posited his poetry: capitalism and *caudillismo*. (And, certainly, whilst the latter emerges both from Montejo's poetics and his thought as the most immediate identification of Chávez, as with the far left groups alluded to above, he does not appear to have considered Chávez to be the challenge to the former that he desired either.)

Bearing in mind, then, the parallels that are set up here, what these references to Holan disclose above all is a further way of understanding what is being offered by the poetic space, beyond its being an alternative linguistic and ontological space (the latter implied in the link between language and being found in Montejo's *Hamlet* poems as well as his wider work). It is clear that the ghost of Gómez cannot be exorcised, and neither is it a question of turning to a political spirit as a solution to contemporary realities. Rather, Montejo's poetry is about poetry itself being the spectre. In both "Hamlet Acto Primero" and "La hora de Hamlet", the spectral nature of language—of poetic language—is foregrounded. Likewise, the poems on which we have been focusing are, in key respects, mutually haunting: "Nostalgia de Bolívar" and "Una fotografía de 1948" provide the figures that haunt "Hamlet Acto Primero" and "La hora de Hamlet", just as these poems haunt our understanding of the former. This characteristic of (Montejo's) poetry points towards the nature and political role of the poetry of the last decade of his life: it is a poetics of haunting, not, to be sure, one haunted by the political realities of *chavismo*, but a poetics that brings itself as a spectre to haunt political reality. And what this spectral poetics offers is precisely an escape from historical, which is to say political, time,¹⁵ both the endless progressionism of capitalism and the periodic return of the *caudillo* figure. In contrast, Montejo's poetry looks to bring together and conflate past, present, and future, not least in "Una fotografía de 1948", where Gómez, Pérez Jiménez, and Chávez each (simultaneously) occupy past, present and future planes, or, similarly, in the temporal confusion of the reciprocal poetic haunting to which I have just referred. Here, the poems "Nostalgia de Bolívar" and "Una fotografía de 1948" that identify the ghost from the past that haunts "Hamlet Acto Primero" and "La hora de Hamlet" respectively, come after these poems. Poetically speaking, that is, it is the present that haunts the past (or, depending on one's perspective, the future that haunts the present). Furthermore, in that "Nostalgia de Bolívar" and "Una fotografía de 1948" are operating in the shadows of "Hamlet Acto Primero" and "La hora de Hamlet" respectively, it is also the case that the poetic depiction of the nation's past that they provide is haunted by the poetic depiction of its present.¹⁶ His poetry offers, that is, not just a linguistic, but also a temporal alternative to Venezuela's historical and political realities, a

¹⁵This should not be understood as a reference to Fukuyama's presentation of the world having, politically, reached the "end of history". Montejo's poetics is concerned, rather, with poetry as a parallel alternative to the (ongoing) political history of Venezuela.

¹⁶See Roberts 2009 (47–61) for a discussion of this non-linear (poetic) understanding of time in Montejo's work.

spectral alternative to modes of time that, to appeal for a final time to the play that subtends this poetry, are very much “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2006: 227).¹⁷

So we are left, then, with different and divergent ways of reading Montejo’s poetics of ghosts, politics and *Hamlet*, caught between seeing his final collections as a stark expression of poetic powerlessness in the political and historical realms or, otherwise, as offering the only genuine alternative discourse and temporality to the different political possibilities to which Venezuela appears enchained. Yet, even in the latter case, the facts of Montejo’s final years within the socio-political reality of Venezuela speak of the difficulty of such a (poetic) being imposing itself on that reality. From private correspondence and from conversations after his death with those close to him, it is apparent that in his last few years Montejo often spent hours at night poring over newspaper and other reports online detailing the division and authoritarianism into which he saw his country descend, frequently unable to think or talk about anything else. He was, that is, a man haunted in his final years by the embodied spectre to which poetry emerges as the only hope for a response.

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¹⁷Gomes 2004 (xxi–xxiv) discusses a different way of seeing the temporal alternative offered by Montejo in his poetry, seeing its concern and respect for a present-ing of the past, including the rural, as a contrast to the disdain for the past on the part of contemporary capitalist Venezuela.

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